SR REVIEWS Books

What Manner of Man in the Big White House?

BY BILL MOYERS

THE PRESIDENTIAL CHARACTER: Predicting Performance in the White House
by James David Barber
Prentice-Hall, 479 pp., $10

Imagine this conversation between two voters leaving the polls in November:

Voter A: Well, what did you do?

Voter B: It was tough. I couldn't decide whether Nixon is an active-positive or an active-negative, or whether McGovern is a passive-positive or a passive-negative. Once there was no doubt in my mind, but the campaign began to blur things to the point that I just wasn't sure. I finally made up my mind during Nixon's final television speech. I saw it in his eyes right there at the end. He's with two minutes to go, he seemed to panic, as if he suddenly realized that no one was believing anything he was saying. He never missed a beat, but for an instant his eyes shifted belligerently as the thought struck him that they were about to take it all away from him before he was through with it. I decided definitely that his self-image is still vague and discontinuous and he still has that problem in managing his aggressive feelings. He's his old active-negative self—there's no doubt about it—and so I didn't vote for him.

Voter A: Then it was McGovern, eh?

Voter B: Actually, no. After watching Nixon, I switched channels and caught McGovern's final speech. I've wanted to believe that McGovern is an active-positive with an orientation toward productiveness as a value and an ability to use his styles flexibly, adaptively, suiting the dance to the music, so to speak. But last night I detected that basic contradiction in his character that has always been his weakness. He's either the receptive, compliant, other-directed character whose style helps soften the harsh edges of politics—the perfect passive-positive type—or deep down he's the true passive-negative with a character-rooted orientation toward doing dutiful service, the type who is in politics because he thinks he ought to be. I'm very suspicious of both types. So I didn't vote for McGovern, either.

Voter A: Then what did you do?

Voter B: I wrote in my own name.

Implausible? Not if Voter B has read *The Presidential Character*. For here is a book that presumes to suggest that presidential behavior can be predicted if one studies the psychological make-up of candidates who seek the White House. To be precise, "the burden of this book is that the crucial differences [in the way various Presidents manage affairs] can be anticipated by an understanding of a potential President's character, his world view, and his style."

My first impression, upon reading that thesis, was to want to suggest to the author that he hie himself away to the nearest psychiatrist's couch; any man with the audacity to take on the subject must be nurturing illusions of Napoleonic dimensions. My second impression was that a very dry and laborious assignment lay ahead of me as I plodded through a pedantic psychological discourse written obviously in some distant ivory tower.

My third impression was that my first two were wrong.

This is an exciting book, the best of its kind I have read. It moves along more like an engrossing biography than a psychological treatise; James David Barber, a "psychohistorian" and professor of political science, formerly at Yale and now at Duke University, has packed the book with scintillating information about Presidents. Herbert Hoover slept only three hours a night when he was in office and was so foreboding that his servants would hide in the closets when he came down the halls. Richard Nixon fell out of a carriage when he was three years old and has suffered from motion sickness ever since. Harry Truman wore such thick glasses when he was a child he couldn't play normal boyhood sports and was considered a mama's boy. Lyndon Johnson, the master mimic of his critics, once administered a dozen whacks to the backside of a pupil who had mimicked him; even then he was, ahem, sensitive to criticism.

But James David Barber is no drawing-room gossip spinning little anecdotes for the amusement of snickering guests at a Georgetown dinner party. Every bit of information is offered to support his effort "to see the man whole—not as some abstract embodiment of civic virtue, some scorecard of issue stands, or some reflections of a faction, but as a human being like the rest of us, a person trying to cope with a difficult environment." The clearest clues to the whole man, Barber argues, are visible in the earliest life histories of our Presidents. "The President is a man with a memory in a system with a history," and to anticipate what that man might do once he is in office, we have to understand what has happened to him long before he set out to win it. That's hard, of course, since we are not inclined to probe fully a President's whole life until he has left office. But it is a helpful reminder in an election year that the child is father to the Commander-in-Chief.

Early experiences shape presidential personalities into four basic types. Active-positive Presidents want most to achieve results; they do a lot and

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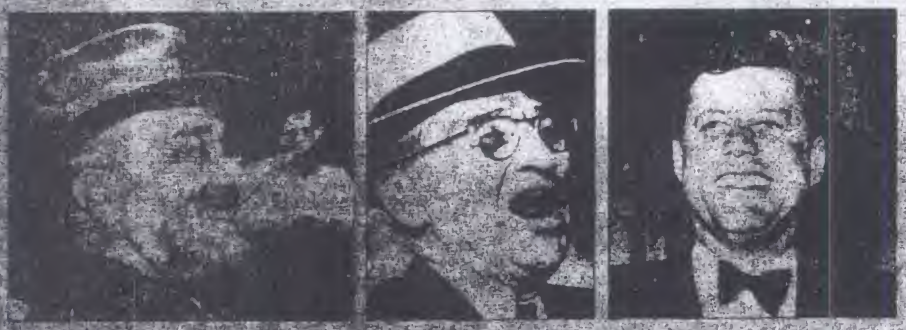


"Active-positives"—at least one was a mama's boy.

devastating aerial warfare in the history of man—all for the stated purpose of maintaining "respect for the Office of the President of the United States."

"This character," Barber writes, "could lead the President on to disaster. . . . So far his crises have been bounded dramas, each apparently curtained with the end of the last act. The danger is that crisis will be transformed into tragedy—that Nixon will go from a dramatic experiment to a moral commitment, a commitment to follow his own private star, to fly off in the face of overwhelming odds. That type of reaction is to be expected when and if Nixon is confronted with a severe threat to his power and sense of virtue."

On the other hand, a victorious Nixon in 1972, freed from the calculations of electoral popularity, could follow the example, not of his hero—the stubborn and dogmatic Wilson—but of another man of independence, unheroic Harry Truman, "who drew upon inner strengths he hardly knew he had to move beyond toughness to achievement."

It is fascinating stuff, and scary, too

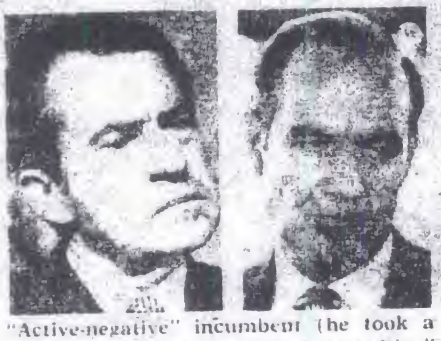
"Passive-positives"—a liking to be liked.

—to be so much at the whim of presidential character. We know so little about the effect of personality upon the office. There are weaknesses in Barber's assumption that we can increase our understanding. We can't know "the man whole," and, even if we did, we would likely be just as prone to vote as much by gut feel as anything. (Remember all those New Hampshire voters in 1968 who voted

"Active-negatives"—servants hid, mimics were punished.

"Passive-negatives"—in place of power, civic virtue and vague principles.

for Eugene McCarthy because they thought he would be tough on communism?) Barber's own bibliography is too selective; his sources for active-positive Presidents include too many unabashedly sympathetic accounts, such as Sorensen's *Kennedy* and Sam Roseman's *Working With Roosevelt*, while for his active-negative types he draws from an imbalanced selection of unfriendly sources. And, finally, it's one thing to analyze with hindsight, to pick out experiences in childhood and adolescence that, looking back, explain behavior in adulthood. But when it comes to predicting presi-



"Active-negative" incumbent (he took a tumble at age three); and "passive positive" hopeful (he might turn another way).

dential behavior, which Barber suggests voters should try to do, how do we know which traumatic and/or happy childhood experiences are the important ones?

But these are negligible shortcomings of Barber's approach, and I think he has written a book as important as Garry Wills's *Nixon Agonistes*. It is not impossible to determine in advance what a candidate might do once he reaches the White House. If politics were a science, it might work. But politics is as capricious as an artist's temperament because, like art, politics is born deep in the mystery of self. There ought to be better ways to choose our leader, but since there aren't, we will have to go on being governed by people who are quite like us. As the man said, America is a place where anybody can grow up to be President, and often does.